

# A Lesson on Reading Fluency Learned From *The Tortoise and the Hare*

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Austin (pseudonym) is sitting at a literacy station in his second-grade classroom with a timer set for one minute. As he presses the start button on the timer, he reads a grade-level passage as quickly as he can, skipping words he does not know. At the beep of the timer he stops reading and records the number of words read on his reading sheet. Austin repeats this process two more times while reading the same passage. Later, Austin's oral reading fluency is assessed by having him read a different grade-level passage for one minute while a teacher records his miscues. His oral reading fluency rate equals the number of words read correctly in one minute. The goal is to reach the benchmark rate for second grade.

In the fable, the tortoise and the hare were striving to reach a goal, the finish line. Even though the hare ran the fastest, he did not attain the goal of reaching the finish line first. Similarly, by relying solely on speed, which is only one aspect of fluency, our students are striving to reach the goal of improved reading. Today elementary, middle, and high school teachers are encountering greater numbers of students who read fast, and many times accurately, but who do not comprehend what is read.

## The Components of Fluency

Reading fluency is defined as “the ability of readers to read quickly, effortlessly, and efficiently with good, meaningful expression” (Rasinski, 2003, p. 26). Reading quickly is only one of three required components of fluency: accuracy, rate, and prosody (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). While rate refers to reading speed, accuracy refers to reading words accurately by sight or by decoding and prosody refers to reading smoothly, effortlessly, and with proper phrasing and expression. Are accuracy and prosody, and even

comprehension (the ultimate goal of reading), being sacrificed at the expense of improving reading rate?

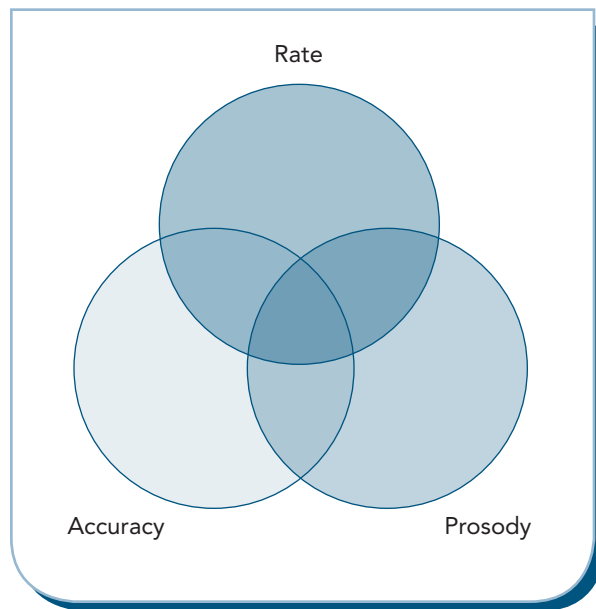
The current widely used practice of using one-minute timed passages to practice and assess oral reading fluency may have limitations that may be viewed by considering rate, accuracy, prosody, and comprehension. The role of each fluency component (see Figure 1) are investigated along with the relationship between fluency and comprehension. Finally, ways to improve all components of fluency so that comprehension is enhanced are offered.

## The Role of Rate in Reading Fluency

Austin was encouraged to read the passage as fast as possible. On assessments of oral reading fluency, where students typically read a passage from grade-level reading material and the number of words read correctly in one minute constitutes the student's reading rate (Baker et al., 2008), the message given to the child is that fast reading equals good reading. In reality, we read different types of texts for different purposes; therefore, reading rate is to be adjusted depending on the text being read and the purpose for which the text is read.

Repeated reading, consisting of rereading a short passage until a satisfactory level of fluency is attained, has been suggested as an effective practice for increasing fluency since the mid to late 1970s (Samuels, 1979). The benefits of repeated reading to increase fluency are well documented (Ardoin, McCall, & Klubnik, 2007; Dahl, 1974, 1979; Samuels, 1979, 1988); however, the text level must be taken into consideration. Austin read the same text as everyone in his class for oral reading fluency practice, progress monitoring, and testing. Within a classroom we find various reading abilities; therefore, it stands to reason that the particular text being read must be at the appropriate level for each individual.

**Figure 1**  
**Components of Fluency**



Another aspect of repeated reading concerns text selection. Few studies have examined the extent to which repeated reading of one passage transfers to students' reading fluency on similar passages (Ardoin et al., 2007).

### **The Role of Accuracy in Reading Fluency**

Accuracy, another component of fluency, refers to either reading words accurately by sight or with the aid of decoding strategies. As Austin read he simply skipped over words he did not know; therefore, his accuracy rate did not increase as words per minute increased. Because accuracy is a component of fluent reading, it seems equally important for accuracy to improve as rate improves. Also without the pressure of time, students might put forth a bit of effort to figure out unknown words, which does take time (Walczyk & Griffith-Ross, 2007).

Reading rate closely relates to the concept of automaticity as well as accuracy. Identifying words fast and effortlessly is a key to skilled reading (Ehri, 1998). One of the first benchmarks for fluency is being able to read sight words; however, an overemphasis on sight reading early on can be counterproductive

by focusing on word memorization without learning techniques for decoding words.

### **The Role of Prosody in Reading Fluency**

Fast reading ignores prosody, the final component of fluency. Prosody refers to reading smoothly, effortlessly, and with proper phrasing and expression. Other features of prosody include pitch or intonation, stress or loudness, and duration or timing (Allington, 1983; Dowhower, 1991; Schreiber, 1980, 1987, 1991). Repeated readings can improve the features of prosody when the focus of rereading is not speed (Dowhower, 1987). Prosody may provide a link between fluency and comprehension. The ability to properly chunk groups of words into phrases and meaningful units is an indicator of a reader's comprehension (Kuhn, 2003).

### **The Relationship of Reading Fluency to Comprehension**

Reading fluency is a critical factor in understanding what is read. When reading is not fluent, students need to devote a significant portion of their cognitive effort to decoding, leaving little cognitive capacity for comprehension. Allowing students to skip unknown words also causes meaning to be lost. Although repeated reading improves fluency, it also has the potential to improve comprehension (Meyer & Felton, 1999; Morgan & Sideridis, 2006; Therrien, 2004). Just as we've seen with Austin, studies have found that students making improvements in reading fluency did not always make improvements in comprehension (Therrien & Hughes, 2008).

### **Fast Reading Does Not Equal Fluent Reading**

Making meaning, rather than speeding through text, is the ultimate goal of reading. Reading rate is important; however, an overemphasis on this aspect of fluency at the expense of other aspects does not ensure that students will attain the goal of comprehension. Applying the lesson learned from the tortoise and the hare, fast reading does not equal fluent reading and may hinder comprehension. Just as slow and steady won the race for the tortoise, fluent reading, with an emphasis on all components of fluency, will ensure

that students reach the “finish line”: fluency and comprehension.

## Improving Reading Fluency to Attain the Goal of Improved Reading

Even though many schools are requiring teachers to use one-minute timed passages to monitor and assess oral reading fluency, the following recommendations (see Table 1) will improve all components of fluency while increasing comprehension.

Modeling of fluent reading can take place throughout the day during read-alouds, echo readings, choral readings, and shared readings and can include teacher think-alouds where all aspects of fluency, as well as comprehension skills and strategies, are shared with students. Meaning is carried not only in the words, but also in the way words are expressed. Explicit language is necessary to explain to students why the story is read a particular way as well as to teach students how to phrase or chunk together parts of sentences into syntactically appropriate units.

Repeated reading, which involves reading a passage or book aloud several times until it can be read at a preestablished fluency level, can take place through a variety of experiences individually, with a partner, or with a group. In addition to the typical practice of individual one-minute timed readings, paired reading tasks two students with reading to each other, where each student supports and gives feedback to the other. Checklists can be incorporated to assist in supporting and giving feedback. Other

kinds of partnerships include teacher–student and parent–student. Paired reading places students in comfortable, nonthreatening situations.

Another type of rereading experience is having groups participate in Readers Theatre, which provides an authentic purpose for rereading practice, thus motivating students. In addition, rehearsing to perform Readers Theatre promotes cooperative interaction among peers and makes rereading more appealing.

Many rereading opportunities to increase fluency are needed on a variety of texts, rather than rereading a single text (Hiebert, 1999; Kamil, Mosenthal, Pearson, & Barr, 2000). Rereading is not practical to implement on all materials (Therrien, 2004). One consideration in choosing materials is the selection of kid-friendly text layouts. Second, choosing familiar books and texts that are written in repetitive phrases increases all aspects of fluency. Reading and rereading easy text where students are exposed to sight words in context will improve both accuracy and automaticity. Third, in selecting materials for rereading, a critical factor is providing books that are just below a student’s instructional level.

Texts matched closely to students’ instructional levels for fluency building can produce significant gains in generalized oral reading fluency (Martens et al., 2007). Rereading practice should take place on easy texts (95% or above accuracy) where students have many opportunities to practice with a high degree of success. Providing texts on interesting topics helps students make connections, thereby enhancing comprehension. In addition, providing books that are interesting and just below a student’s instructional

**Table 1**  
**Effective Fluency Practice to Enhance Comprehension**

- Model fluent reading in all content areas using teacher think-alouds
- Provide a variety of rereading experiences: partner reading, Readers Theatre, echo reading, choral reading, shared reading, individual reading
- Provide a variety and large number of texts for rereading
- Select texts for rereading matched to individual students’ reading levels and just below their instructional level
- Provide quality instruction in decoding and comprehension skills and strategies
- Provide explicit reinforcement and corrective feedback during rereading by prompting rather than telling

level will help motivate the student and maintain interest in reading.

Guided reading using positive reinforcement and corrective feedback during oral reading is crucial in helping students monitor their reading: knowing when reading errors take place and knowing how to correct the errors. With corrective feedback and reinforcement not only is rate improved, but also accuracy and comprehension are improved (Ardoin et al., 2007). Prompts during oral reading help students become aware of breakdowns in the reading process and also help students make decisions about skills and strategies needed to correct the problems; therefore, independence is promoted. What is said to the student in the form of prompts provides a scaffold to help students solve their own problems, lending support while not doing the work for the student.

Along with feedback during oral reading, it goes without saying that the teaching of decoding and comprehension skills and strategies must take place. Quality instruction using planned lessons as well as teachable moments can take place during whole-group, small-group, or individual instruction. Flexible small-group focus lessons can target specific skills and strategies.

While teaching all aspects of fluency, care must be taken not to teach for fluency at the expense of comprehension. Through every reading experience teachers should engage students in conversations where making meaning takes place.

Reading fluency develops gradually over time and through extensive practice. The above recommendations, put into practice, could lead to Austin's reading at an appropriate rate with accuracy and prosody, while comprehending what is being read. An added benefit would be Austin's developing a love of reading, leading to lifelong reading.

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## Lesson Link

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- ▶ Readers Theatre